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Revisiting Gandhian Self-Reliance Through PMKVY

(From Skill-Acquisition to Micro-Entrepreneurship)

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Abstract: With a population of approximately 145 crores, but only a fraction being adequately skilled and employable, the Indian government has faced a truly daunting task in eradicating unemployment. The problem, soon recognized, was less the lack of jobs and more skilled workers who were competent enough to earn more than minimum wage and sustain themselves beyond just basic necessities. Considering these challenges, and in accordance with the Gandhian principle of self-reliance, India launched Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) with the aim of creating a skilled workforce that is self-reliant, adaptable, and competitive in an evolving job market.

This present research paper seeks to evaluate the recent success and challenges faced by PMKVY in addressing its major objectives and aligning with the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi, whose idea of self-reliance was deeply rooted within his broader philosophy of Swadeshi and rural regeneration. Over the course of the past few years, PMKVY has evolved and changed from PMKVY 1.0 to PMKVY 4.0, incorporating the elements of modern training and transition required for people's development. It aims to train individuals using monetary incentives in order to encourage them to take part in skill learning programs. This research analyses data from different primary and secondary sources to assess its national impact and contribution towards fostering self-reliant livelihoods.

Keywords: Reliance, Decentralization, Mechanization, Entrepreneurial etc.

Introduction: India is not a nation in crisis, but it is undeniably one in urgent need of transformative change to address its persistent challenges, foremost among them unemployment. Sometimes, to counter the challenges of present times, it bodes well to look towards luminaries of the past who gave their heart towards the development of this nation. Mahatma Gandhi, a person who propagated his ideals of *ahimsa* across the world, also gave monumental importance to self-reliance and rural regeneration. He was a stout advocate for up skilling the population of India (primarily rural, as they were, and still are, in desperate need of sustainable employment) and crafting a skilled workforce that could sustain itself, and subsequently, sustain India without any external aid.

When formulating national agendas, the government tries its level best to give its citizens their due share of everything (beginning with basic amenities like food, healthcare, or employment), but a better alternative is to make the citizens of India capable enough to acquire enough resources to sustain themselves. Through the labyrinth of these challenges, India decided to find its way by implementing the *Pradhan Mantri Kausushal Vikas Yojna (PMKVY)*.

Mahatma Gandhi's profound impact on India went beyond politics and incorporated social and economic elements as well. Although his agenda was the fulfilment of the soul and the complete realization of an individual's potential:

“His (Mahatma Gandhi's) economic thoughts were very crucial in decreasing, if not eliminating, the economic divide between rich and poor and were influenced by his two guiding principles of ‘truth’ and ‘non-violence’. He believed further that work was not only an economic activity but also was necessary for spiritual growth, and his emphasis was on morally correct goals, which were crucial to his economic thoughts.”¹

Mahatma Gandhi time and again critiqued Western civilisation for its ‘multiplication of wants’, viewing them as deeply shallow and ultimately detrimental to the human spirit because a Western model cannot fulfil the needs of an Indian citizen. It remains India's ground reality that, to a certain extent, these Western ideas have not been able to address the true needs of the Indian citizens but have exponentially increased their wants. But Gandhi's model of economic development:

“by contrast, aimed at the fulfillment of needs – including the need for meaning and community. As a school of economics the resulting model contained elements of protectionism, nationalism, adherence to the principles and objectives of nonviolence and a rejection of class war in favor of socio-economic harmony.”²

His economic philosophy of self-reliance can be broken down into three categories for better understanding: his idea of *Swadeshi*, decentralised production and village industries. He defined *Swadeshi* as, “the spirit in us which restricts us to the use and services of our immediate, to the exclusion of the more remote”³. His focus was rightly directed towards growing the Indian economy by promoting native artists and craftsmen as opposed to imported material, which, contrarily, helps foreign countries. In contemporary times, this idea still remains relevant as many of the opportunities of small-scale business owners and rural employees is being snatched away by multinational conglomerates.

He also envisioned the decentralization of production that would allow each individual to work for themselves and through moral means of production, upholding the dignity of labour. His hope was to see India prosper with the help of self-sufficient villages, independent of external markets that could make them vulnerable. Since countless international businesses have taken hold in India, it has become imperative for Indian businesses to adapt and develop themselves according to international standards in order to compete with them. Mahatma Gandhi was never entirely against mechanization but advocated that it is a suitable option for countries with scarce labour, not one like India, where the population is abundant (a concept which rings true even today as the unemployment and population constantly keep rising).

In this context, a program like PMKVY comes forth as a flagship initiative designed to help the less fortunate by actively making them a part of the skilled economy of India. It relies not on subsidiary schemes but rather on education to make permanent positive changes in the lives of people so that they can sustain their families. It operates under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) through the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC). PMKVY is has attempted to

foster the business mindset among its beneficiaries, as we know that “the government has spent Rs. 1244.52 (as on 31.12.2024) on developing and adapting PMKVY to the standards of the modern market”.⁴

Micro entrepreneurship is a key tenet of self-reliance, but today not many members of society possess enough resources or skills to innovate and set up their enterprise. Money can be borrowed, but a skill must always be learnt first that can later be capitalised. To this end, PMKVY has lent considerable help to its beneficiaries. A micro entrepreneur is often defined as someone who, “usually owns a microenterprise and is engaged in innovating new ways of doing business or initiating changes in the production function, exploring market opportunities for his product and, ultimately changing the culture of doing business.”⁵

The modern concept of microeconomics based on micro credit can be seen as parallel to the tenets of Gandhian economics that envisioned the village to be a place which emphasised a human-centred, sustainable, and equitable model of development. Gandhi’s idea of *sarvodaya* (upliftment of all) laid emphasis on collective happiness and the ethical model of development rather than the sole focus on economic ends.

When one considers the broader implications of the economic models of development (primarily Western), one not only runs across the problem of population within the Indian context but also the lack of resources that each individual has at their disposal. If such people are ever to cross the below poverty line and become active contributors to the GDP, a job might not be the best option for them; rather, a small-scale business, which makes them self-employed and empowers them to create more job opportunities, might be the best alternative. A micro entrepreneur, in this sense, can best serve the nation. By definition, a micro entrepreneur can be “traders, street vendors, small farmers, service providers (hairdressers, rickshaw pullers), artisans and small producers, such as blacksmiths and seamstresses”⁶ who are committed to developing the necessary skills for furthering their business and creating a better life for themselves.

The Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojna, under the broader ‘Skill India’ initiative, primarily aims to enable and mobilise a large number of youth citizens of India to attend skill-based training initiatives in order to learn marketable skills that can make them employable.

PMKVY 1.0 was launched on July 15, 2015 (World Youth Skill Day) to promote skill development by providing free short-duration skill training and incentivizing youth with monetary rewards for skill certification. “In its first phase, the initiative managed to train 19.85 lakh candidates”⁷.

PMKVY 2.0 (2016 - 2020) was launched by scaling up in terms of sector and geography with a parallel to other government initiatives like Make in India, Digital India, and Swachh Bharat, “an overall budgetary allocation of INR 12,000 crore for four years”⁸. PMKVY strives not only to bridge economic but also social disparity as well with a near gender parity in participation, “with 50.75% male and 49.2% female respondents”⁹.

Further, data also elucidates that, “women accounted for 55% of placements in the top five sectors (Apparel, Retail, Beauty, Telecon, and Electronics) under PMKVY”¹⁰. However, a gap still remains since it was noticed that, “approximately 90% of the people involved in engineering training were men, and 60% of respondents in non-engineering training were women.”¹¹

The scope of PMKVY is not limited to women of India; it also offers special schemes to promote training modules for marginalised sections of society, specifically the SC/ST community. The

training is not only free for individuals, but a skill council for PWD also works with PMKVY to ensure the adequate adaptation of training methodology for their benefit.

If executed properly and timely, PMKVY has the potential to fulfil the Gandhian vision of a self-reliant village that does not need to depend on the cities for employment and financial aid. It is a well-documented fact that beneficiaries of the PMKVY have constantly faced challenges because of technological limitations and their inability to shift to big cities for employment due to financial constraints.

One major problem that this initiative falls short of addressing is the financial resources required for a person to start a business (even a small-scale one). The MUDRA yojana launched by the government to financially aid skilled individuals of India, allowing them to start a new business, has not had much success because PMKVY does not have adequate modules for training its beneficiaries in the values central to entrepreneurship. Dr. Halil Ahmed insightfully pointed out:

“The MUDRA Yojna of the government was launched to finance the skilled youth so that they not only become self-employed but also create employment for others. The demand-supply mismatch has created another kind of problem that is loan given to these skilled youth under MUDRA Yojna has turned into NPAs (Non-Performing Assets) in large number”¹²

The Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) can be seen as a brilliant effort to revive Gandhian principles of self-reliance, decentralized production, and inclusive economic growth. The initiative aims to bridge social and economic disparity among rural members of society by training them in modern skills that make them employable in the ever-changing job market of the cities. One of its key tenets is to focus on the development of the marginalized sections of society, including women and the SC/ST community, by making them self-reliant and active contributors to India’s economy. Although eliminating unemployment is a truly daunting task, PMKVY offers an alternative path forward, one where the dignity of labor and skill-based empowerment take precedence over mere job creation.

However, PMKVY is far from perfect in addressing all the gaps and issues that still remain in society, preventing it from unleashing its full potential. Its inability to train individuals in entrepreneurship skills limits its outreach because a business owner can, in turn, become an employer for several people in need. The lack of proper financial literacy, entrepreneurial mindset, and support mechanisms such as access to credit or mentoring, leads many skilled individuals to be too terrified to start an enterprise for themselves. This potential will remain unrealised until the initiative evolves beyond vocational training to inculcate a more comprehensive model that supports enterprise creation, ensures post-training support, and addresses regional and sectoral imbalances. Through timely changes and adaptation, India’s youth transition from job seekers to job creators can be made possible.

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